

Happy hookers: sex workers and their would-be saviors



Melissa Gira Grant on the framework in which sex work is discussed.

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When it reached their top five, the *New York Times* described the book as “liberally dosed with sex fantasies for the retarded.” The woman who wrote them and lived them, Xaviera Hollander, became a folk hero. She remains the accidental figurehead of a class of women who may or may not have existed before she lived and wrote. Of course, they must have existed, but if they hadn’t, say the critics of hooker happiness, we would have had to invent them.

Is prostitution so wicked a profession that it requires such myths?

We may remember the legend, but the particulars of the happy hooker story have faded. Hollander and the characters that grew up around her are correctly recalled as sexually omnivorous, but desire alone didn’t make her successful as a prostitute. She realized that the sex trade is no underworld, that it is intimately entangled in city life, in all the ways in which we are economically interdependent. Hollander was famous for being able to sweep through the lobby of the Palace Hotel, unnoticed and undisturbed, on her way to an assignation, not



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because she didn't "look like" a working girl, but because she knew that too few people understood what a working girl really looked like.

In *The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington*, a 1977 film adapted from Hollander's memoir, a scene opens with teletype bashing the screen with Woodward-and-Bernstein urgency.

Flashlights sweep a darkened hall. Inside an unlocked office, a criminal scene is revealed: a senator embracing a prostitute. Hollander is called before Congress to testify. When the assembled panel interrogates her career, attacking her morals, she is first shameless, then spare but sharp in pointing out the unsurprising fact that these men are patrons of the very business they wish to blame for America's downfall.

What's on trial in the film is ridiculous, but the questions are real. What value does a prostitute bring to society? Or is hooking really not so grandiose as all that? Could it be just another mostly tedious way to take ownership over something all too few of us are called before Congress to testify on (the conditions of our work)?

Did you know that 89 per-cent of the women in prostitution want to escape?" a young man told me on the first day of summer this year, as he protested in front of the offices of the *Village Voice*. He wanted me to understand that it is complicit in what he calls "modern-day slavery." The *Village Voice* has moved the bulk of the sex-related ads it publishes onto the website Backpage.com. This young man, the leader of an Evangelical Christian youth group, wanted to hasten

the end of “sex slavery” by shutting Backpage.com down. What happens to the majority of people who advertise willingly on the site, who rely on it to draw an income?

“The reality is,” the man said to me, not knowing I had ever been a prostitute, “almost all of these women don’t really want to be doing it.”

Let’s ask the people around here, I wanted to say to him: the construction workers who dug up the road behind us, the cabbies weaving around the construction site, the cops over there who have to babysit us, the Mister Softee guy pulling a double shift in the heat, the security guard outside a nearby bar, the woman working inside, the receptionist upstairs. The freelancers at the *Village Voice*. The guys at the copy shop who printed your flyers. The workers at the factory that made the water bottles you’re handing out. Is it unfair to estimate that 89 percent of New Yorkers would rather not be doing what they have to do to make a living?

“True, many of the prostitution ads on Backpage are placed by adult women acting on their own without coercion,” writes *New York Times* columnist and professional prostitute savior Nicholas Kristof. But, he continues, invoking the happy hooker trope, “they’re not my concern.” He would like us to join him in separating women into those who chose prostitution and those who were forced into it; those who view it as business and those who view it as exploitation; those who are workers and those who are victims; those who are irremediable and those who can be saved. These categories are too narrow. They fail to explain the reality of one woman’s work, let alone a class of women’s labor. In this scheme, a happy hooker is apparently unwavering in her love of fucking and will fuck anyone for the right price. She has no grievances, no politics.

But happy hookers, says Kristof, don’t despair, this isn’t about women like you – we don’t really mean to put you out of work. Never mind that shutting down the businesses people in the sex trade depend on for safety and survival only exposes all of them to danger and poverty, no matter how much choice they have. Kristof and the Evangelicals outside the *Village Voice* succeed only in taking choices away from people who are unlikely to turn up outside the *New York Times*, demanding that Kristof’s column be taken away from him.

Even if they did, with the platform he’s built for himself as the true expert on sex workers’

lives, men like Kristof can't be run out of town so easily. There's always another

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conference, another women's rights organization eager to hire his expertise. Kristof and those like him, who have made saving women from themselves their pet issue and vocation, are so fixated on the notion that almost no one would ever choose to sell sex that they miss the dull and daily choices that all working people face in the course of making a living. Kristof himself makes good money at this, but to consider sex workers' equally important economic survival is inconvenient for him.

This business of debating sex workers' choices and whether or not they have them has only become more profitable under what sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein terms "post-industrial prostitution."

After the vigilant anti-prostitution campaigns of the last century, which targeted red-light districts and street-based prostitution, sex work has moved mostly indoors, into private apartments and gentlemen's clubs, facilitated by the internet and mobile phones. The sex economy exists in symbiosis with the leisure economy: personal services, luxury hotels, all increasingly anonymous and invisible. At the same time, more young people find themselves without a safety net, dependent on informal economies. Sex work now isn't a lifestyle; it's a gig, one of many you can select from a venue like Backpage or Craigslist.

Recall the favored slogan of prostitution prohibitionists that on the internet, they could buy a sofa and "a girl." It's not the potential purchase of a person that's so outrageous; it's the proximity of that person to the legitimate market.

Bernstein calls these "slippery borders," and asks us to observe the feelings provoked by them, and how they are transferred. Anxieties about slippery market borders become

"anxieties about slippery moral borders," which are played out on the bodies of sex workers.

The anxiety is that sex work may be legitimate after all. In a sense, the prohibitionists are correct: people who might have never gotten into the sex trade before can and are. Fighting what they call "the normalizing of prostitution" is the focus of anti-sex work feminists. In this view, one happy hooker is a threat to all women everywhere.

“It’s sad,” said the speaker from the women’s-rights ngo Equality Now in protest outside the *Village Voice*. She directed her remarks at the cluster of sex workers who had turned out in counterprotest. “Backpage is able to be a pimp. They’re so normalizing this behavior that a group of Backpage advertisers have come out today to oppose us.” So a prostitute’s dissent is only possible if, as they understand prostitution itself, she was forced into it.

“Why did it take so long for the women’s movement to genuinely consider the needs of whores, of women in the sex trades?” asks working-class queer organizer and ex-hooker Amber L. Hollibaugh, in her book *My Dangerous Desires*. “Maybe because it’s hard to listen to – I mean really pay attention to – a woman who, without other options, could easily be cleaning your toilet? Maybe because it’s intolerable to listen to the point of view of a woman who makes her living sucking off your husband?”

Hollibaugh points to this most difficult place, this politics of feelings performed by some feminists, in absence of solidarity. They imagine how prostitution must feel, and how that in turn makes them feel, despite all the real-life prostitutes standing in front of them to dispute them.

It didn’t used to be that people opposed to prostitution could only get away with it by insisting that “happy” prostitutes didn’t really exist. From Gilgamesh to the Gold Rush days, right up until Ms. Hollander’s time, being a whore was reason enough for someone to demand you be driven out of town. Contemporary prostitution prohibitionists consider the new reality, in which they deny the existence of anyone with agency in prostitution, a form of victory for women. We aren’t ruined now. We’re victims.

Perhaps what they fear most of all is that prostitutes could be happy: that what we’ve been told is the worst thing we can do to ourselves is not the worst, or even among the worst. What marks us as fallen – whether from feminism or Christ or capital – is any suggestion that prostitution did not ruin us and that we can deliver that news ourselves.

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